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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000640

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SUBJECT: THE NATIONAL LIBRARY: LUKASHENKO'S DIAMOND OR
MINSK'S LEANING BALL OF GLASS?

Classified By: AMBASSADOR GEORGE KROL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

[¶1.](#) (U) Summary: The June 9 grand opening of the Belarusian National Library, a 23-story glass diamond-shaped monstrosity on the outskirts of Minsk, was again postponed. Although the authorities did not give a reason for the delay, independent news sources expect it is related to the perennial problems with the library's construction. Emboffs have heard first-hand stories about the library's problems, including high humidity, lagging computer systems, shattered windows, and falling ice are a result of hasty construction and the authorities' refusal to purchase quality technology. End Summary.

Lukashenko's Diamond

[¶2.](#) (U) In November 2002, Belarusian dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko ordered the construction of Belarus' National Library as a monument to his tenure as the first president of Belarus. Built on what was once marshland, the library today is a 236-ft tall building encapsulated in pane glass. The first three stories house reading rooms and offices and serve as a pedestal for the 20-story polyhedron, referred to as "the diamond," that towers above and serves as a depository with a 14 million-book capacity. The library has 18 reading rooms to accommodate 2,000 visitors, 33 single-person rooms, 10 conference rooms, a 500-person conference hall, an exhibition hall, a restaurant, health center, gym, beauty parlor, and bars and cafeterias. The Library also contains a suite of offices for Lukashenko.

Postponed Openings

[¶3.](#) (U) The National Library was to have its grand opening on June 9, but was postponed to June 16. According to initial plans, the library was to be finished in six years, but several months into the project authorities demanded the library be finished in three years and scheduled the grand opening for September 2005. When fall 2005 arrived, the library was still not finished and the opening was delayed to the first weekend in May, then to June 9, and finally to June [¶16.](#) Many blame the delays on unfinished construction, but according to the independent press, Lukashenko plans to open the library during the EurAsEc summit, with many CIS heads, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, present.

Too Humid For Books

[¶4.](#) (C) Designer of the National Library Viktor Kramarenko on June 12 assured journalists the library was ready for operation, but added that due to the library's large size, there would always be little problems that needed to be

fixed. Throughout the project, Emboffs have heard first hand how "little" these problems can be. Minsk businessman Vladimir Lukonin (strictly protect) owns an air-conditioning company that won a million-dollar tender to install air-conditioning units in the library. During several meetings, Lukonin-trying to conceal his chuckles and frustration-told Poloff of major deficiencies with the library. First, authorities ordered Lukonin to install the air-conditioning units in a much shorter time period than the bid initially required. Second, they told Lukonin to install manual units rather than automatics, which would force the library staff to adjust each unit by hand rather than through a centralized computer system. Lukonin predicted this decision would not help with the library's already humid atmosphere of toxic fumes, due to paint that was unable to dry.

The Leaning Glass Ball

15. (U) To silence widespread rumors that the library was leaning, representatives of Minsk's architectural design bureau in January told journalists that the peat layer under the foundations of the library posed no threat to the structure. According to the bureau, the 16-feet thick peat layer was 118 feet deep and sandwiched between clay layers, providing a solid foundation.

Death Ice On Glass

16. (C) Minsk's design bureau also announced it was searching for ways to remove snow from the top of the diamond and suggested using snow-melting equipment. According to one architect, the snowcaps "misshape" the building. However,

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Lukonin told Poloff that the snowcap problem was more serious than architects were willing to admit. He said designers did not anticipate that frozen chunks of ice would fall 20-stories and smash through the glass ceiling of the foyer at the library's entrance. Lukonin said no one was injured when it first happened and the builders replaced the foyer panes with thicker glass, but Lukonin claimed ice chunks falling 20 stories would still cause serious damage.

Wrong Materials

17. (C) Lukonin also informed Poloff that the grayish-blue glass used on the Library was not part of the original design. According to Lukonin, the leading architect ordered gold tinted glass from a domestic manufacturer, but instead received the grayish-blue glass. The architect proved to disgruntled authorities that he had ordered the type of glass stipulated in the design. The authorities, therefore, used the mistaken glass for construction but refused to pay the glass manufacturer's USD 8.2 million bill, causing his business to go bankrupt.

A Belarusian Made Computer System

18. (C) On February 7, director of the Belarusian-American software company Belsoft Dennis Shut (strictly protect) told EconOff about the library's insufficient computer system. Shut explained that GOB authorities wanted a "top-of-the-line" software package produced by an Israeli firm. Therefore, Belsoft, the licensed agent for the Israeli company, submitted a bid. However, the GOB refused to pay for software licensing or technical support and finally cancelled the bid, arguing they could get the Belarusian Academy of Sciences to build the system at a cheaper price. Shut shook his head in disgust and explained that the Belarusian-designed computer system lacked many things, including an integrated network controlling the humidity.

Flying Books

¶9. (SBU) A local Embassy employee informed Poloff of stories she heard from her friend who works as a librarian at the National Library. According to the librarian, the library has a conveyor system to move books from room to room and is suspended from the ceiling, hanging above the heads of the library staff and visitors in the quiet reading rooms. The noisy conveyers move the books at such high speeds that books are frequently flung from the conveyor, hitting the heads of people sitting below.

Calling The Student Brigades

¶10. (U) The authorities are not just relying on the builders and librarians to see the project to completion. In January, Deputy Minister of Culture Valery Gudroits told reporters that soldiers, police, and students were expected to help relocate over 8 million items from the old National Library to the new facility. Independent news sources have reported that students and salaried workers (including librarians) are often sent to the National Library on Saturdays, without pay, to help finish the construction of the facilities. Those involved have reported windows shattering for no apparent reason, leaks in the climate-control system in the rare books department, and a computer system that still does not work. According to press reports, even if the library were to be officially opened in June, only a small section would be open to the public.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) People have jokingly, but with some seriousness, predicted the library could one day topple over and roll into downtown Minsk. A TDY OBO building inspector in 2005 told Emboff that from first glance, the library's architectural design looked unsound and rumors have long circulated that the designers did not take into account important facts, such as the weight of the books, when constructing the building. Deputy Culture Minister Gudroits called the library a "big brain" that no other CIS country had. A better description could be a malfunctioning brain and an eyesore for Minsk-but an appropriate monument to Belarus' first and still only president.
Krol